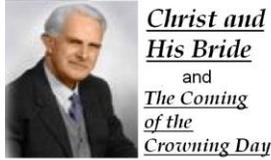


Christ and His Bride and The Coming of the Crowning Day

by T. Austin-Sparks



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Christ and His Bride

"Christ... loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27).

The Father appointed all things for His Son. Those 'all things' were to be the joint inheritance of His Son and His Son's bride, the Church. That comes out very clearly in the New Testament. That bride was in the race of mankind, created as we are told in the book of Genesis. That bride would have to be of a certain order, a certain character, a certain kind, to be suitable to that Son. She would have to be a very special bride, she would have to be made for Him most suitable.

Then we have the story of Adam and Eve, and we know what happened through their surrender to Satan. Something spiritual happened in them, a change took place in their very nature. God had made them, firstly, for union with Himself; then for communion with Himself; and then for likeness to Himself; and in dependence upon Himself; leading to the last thing, absolute and implicit faith in Him. Those are the five things which characterise the Church according to God's mind - (1) union with God, vital union, the union of one life; (2) communion with God, intercourse, fellowship, oneness of mind; (3) likeness to God, in His own image and after His likeness, taking character from Him, He giving His character and His nature to the Church; then (4) dependence upon Him so complete that there is no life apart from Him. (It is one of the great tests of marriage union - and I should say, taking

it from a man's standpoint, a most difficult one - for a wife to be absolutely dependent upon a man for every penny. There is a revolt against that in our times: but God meant it to be like that with His Church - just absolute dependence, having nothing apart from Him, drawing everything from Him.) And that means (5) perfect faith in Him. Those five things must characterise the bride of Christ.

Now the thing that happened when Satan carried the day with those two changed all that. It broke the union; it brought an end to the communion; it marred the likeness and made impossible its full expression; independence came in - for theirs was an independent act: Satan had tempted them to act on their own, without any relationship to God at all - and that all meant that faith in God was destroyed. It was something that happened in the nature. It was not just an act, but something that entered into their very nature; and so that is how we find the race.

Now the Lord lays His hand upon one and another of those who are to form that bride. He brings them to the place where they have to make this decision and take this position - 'I die to all that which happened long, long ago; I die to broken union, to interrupted communion, to spoiled likeness, to all independence and unbelief. I repudiate it, I put it all away; I say that belongs to a creation which I hate, and I want that to be done with, dead and buried. In Christ union is restored, communion begins again, the likeness, conformity to the Son, is taken up by the Holy Spirit; I am from this time utterly and wholly dependent upon the Lord, not to live unto myself but henceforth "unto him who for their sakes died and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:15), and henceforth my faith is in Him.'

"Christ loved the church," and He gave Himself, for one thing, to purchase her; for the other thing, to effect that death of herself, on her behalf. We cannot kill ourselves, but the Lord Jesus has done it for us. He has died to all that other condition for us, and has risen to all this thought of God for us. So that in His death we died to all that happened in Eden, and in His resurrection we rise to all that God ever intended that bride to be. "Christ... loved the church, and gave himself up for it... that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing."

That brings us to this further stage, that we are together as the Church, as the bride, on resurrection ground, and ours is no longer an independent life, even as Christians. We are dependent upon one another in Christ, because Christ has committed Himself to the Church, and we come into a greater fulness of Christ in a related way with one another than we should if we were just isolated individuals; we get a greater fulness of Christ in our fellowship together. So we need the Church, because Christ comes to us in the Church, and this dependence upon the Lord is shown by our spiritual dependence upon one another, upon fellowship, upon the communion of the people of God. In Christ we are one, providing Him with what the Father ever intended Him to have - a glorious Church.

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The Coming of the Crowning Day

by T. Austin-Sparks

Peter, Paul, James and John all point us onward to the crowns which God offers to His servants. In each case the thought is related to an ordeal, whether it be a fight, a race or a trust. Three crowns are spoken of - the crown of righteousness, the crown of life and the crown of glory, and it seems that what is meant by crowning is the sealing of a course in triumph and with honour, the crown being a symbol both of victory and of honour.

1. The Crown of Righteousness

Righteousness is really a matter of God having His rights, that He shall be all in all, everything being centred in Him and given to Him. Unrighteousness is a disposition that we shall be the centre, and everything given to us, which is, in fact, satanic. Sin is the dethroning of God from His true place: righteousness is the bringing of God back into His place. That is what the cross has done.

Paul was a great champion of the righteousness which is established by the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and for that he fought a good fight. So far as we are concerned there is a challenge as to how far we will let go of our personal interests so that God should have His place. This is the battleground. It is a very real battle. So far as Paul was concerned he affirmed: "for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse...", the issue being that he might be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of his own, but that which comes through faith in Christ. It has always been that by means of the people who have but one interest, namely that the Lord should have His rightful place, that the kingdom of Satan has been overthrown. That is righteousness and that is the battleground. The apostle says that there is a crown of righteousness at the end, awaiting those who have been willing to pour out their lives so that the rights of God might be secured for Him by the cross of the Lord Jesus.

2. The Crown of Life

This crown is also placed in the setting of difficulty, suffering and adversity. It is for the man who endures temptation (James 1:12). Whenever we triumph on the battlefield for the rights of God, there is a new release of His life. It is the objective of the enemy always to seek to quench that life. The Word tells us that we are all in the battle for life. Satan at the beginning schemed and worked in order that he should capture the race for himself and defeat God's ends. Whenever he has succeeded it has been by hindering men from having divine life; a life which is not only continuity of existence but a quality of holy life.

Satan is now out to quench you. As the Lord's child, the question arises as to just how much you will lay hold on the Lord's life and how much in faith you will resist the working of spiritual death. You get up in the morning wondering what is the matter with you. For no apparent reason you feel depressed, "dead". What are you going to do about it? Will you yield to it? Or will you put up a real fight in prayer? You will find that this is something more than just a passing bad feeling; you are in the battle for life.

It is the man who is approved who will receive the crown of life. How are you going to be approved? You have never seen a scholar approved who threw aside his test paper and said: "I can never do anything like that! It is no use trying!" or even one who said: "I cannot go on any more. I will give it up!" No. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Is it a battle? Well, do not give in. Is it a race? Do not drop out. Is it a trust? Do not surrender your trust. Go right through with it, and you will receive a crown of life.

3. The Crown of Glory

"When the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). Sometimes you can almost see that in people here and now. They have such an utterance of devotion to the Lord and such a complete selflessness of life that they carry around with them a radiance of God's glory. Put it the other way round and you will certainly agree that in people who are always occupied with themselves and taken up with their own troubles and difficulties, there seems to be a constant shadow. Such people bring

nothing of brightness and glory with them. Glory is really the nature of righteousness and life manifesting itself.

It is very significant to notice the setting of Peter's words. He has just been talking to the under-shepherds, and telling them to feed the flock and to do it not for filthy lucre or the praise of men, but disinterestedly, denying themselves in the interests of the Lord and His people. It may be costly so to serve the Lord, Peter says, but if you do it with that spirit then at the end there will be a crown of glory for you from the chief Shepherd who is Himself crowned with glory.

So there is righteousness - God having His place in all things. And there is life - victory in His name with His own eternal life regnant in us. And finally there is glory - the life of the Lord manifesting itself in fullness in a glorious outburst of triumph over sin and death. These three crowns, these three seals, these three marks that we have triumphed, these are what the Lord has set His heart upon to give to us who are redeemed by the blood of Christ and indwelt by His Spirit. May our hearts also be set on obtaining them so that He may find satisfaction in us, through grace.

Let us make no mistake, though, that these will not come easily to us. They are the fruits of battle, of fierce battle and very often of inward battle. I sometimes think that it might be easier if our foes were more outward and the battle objective, easily discernible. It may be that in some cases believers are cast into prison and tried for the sake of the Lord's name, but in any case we are all put into positions where the responsibility for the testimony of Jesus are worked out in us, and the principle of faithfulness unto death operates in our case. When the thing to be overcome is inside, when it is I myself who must be slain, then it may be ever harder. This, then, is the moment to look away to Christ on the throne and to know that He has provided a victory which we can daily enjoy.

There is a serious business on hand for the Church. It is nothing less than the fulfilment of her vocation, the accomplishment of her course and the preserving intact of her trust. We are called to stand for the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ in a hostile world. What a privilege to be called to stand for those sovereign rights, and then what a wonderful prospect to be offered crowns for so doing. We want Christ to have all the crowns. He wants to share crowns with us. He has been "crowned with glory and honour"; He calls us to be partners together with Him at the coming of His Crowning Day.